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Elena E. Karpova

Iowa State University, karpova@iastate.edu

Sara B. Marcketti

Iowa State University, sbb@iastate.edu

Jessica Barker

Iowa State University

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Putting the Puzzle Together: Apparel Industry Perspectives on Creativity

Elena Karpova, Sara B. Marcketti, & Jessica Barker
Iowa State University, Ames, IA, USA

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Innovation is essential to a company's success and sustained competitive advantage (Ford & Gioia, 2000) and employee creativity provides for such innovation (Petty & Guthrie, 2000). Despite the wide recognition of the importance of creativity to organizational and personal success, there is no consensus on what constitutes creativity and how it is utilized in the workforce. For example, a creativity expert noted that it "can be regarded as the quality of products or responses judged to be creative by appropriate observers, and it can also be regarded as the process by which something so judged is produced" (Amabile, 1983, p. 359). Other definitions of creativity encompass the creative person and/or the creative environment (Warr & O'Neill, 2005). While the importance of innovation and creativity in the fast-paced and extremely competitive apparel business is undeniable (Malem, 2008), researchers have not yet examined industry professionals' views on this topic. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to understand the role of creativity within the apparel industry by exploring experiences and perspectives of industry professionals. Specifically, this research investigated: (a) how the industry insiders defined creativity and (b) the degree to which creativity was used by the industry professionals in diverse positions and responsibilities. Such exploration allows for understanding of the meaning and role of creativity in professions associated with apparel and fashion. Educators can then use this knowledge in efforts to develop student creativity.

In-depth, structured interviews were used to collect the data. This method allowed participants the opportunity to freely express ideas and opinions to explore the topic of creativity in their own words. To minimize interviewer bias, exact questions were followed from an interview protocol. Purposive and snowball sampling techniques were used for this study as it maximized the acquisition of relevant information (Esterberg, 2002). We first contacted members of our program's advisory board. Next, each interviewee was asked to recommend other potential research participants. Approximately half of the interviews were conducted in person with the remainder completed over the telephone. With the informants' consent, all interviews were audio taped to ensure accuracy in transcription. Interviews ranged from 1 to 2 hours in length.

A total of twenty-nine professionals were interviewed. We ensured representation of small, medium, and large size firms as well as a mix of diverse job titles and responsibilities including creative (7) and technical designers (2), entrepreneurs (5), merchandisers (4), sales managers (3), product developers (3), educators (3), and museum curators (2). A wide range of companies located in the Midwest and East and West coasts, from apparel import intermediaries to mass market and specialty retailers to designer's houses were included. Participants' work experience ranged from 1.5 to 30 years. Interpretive approach that focused on individuals' experiences through their perspective was used to analyze the transcribed interviews (van Manen, 1990). The narrative was first analyzed by the three authors independently through an iterative part-to-whole process (McCracken 1988; Spiggle 1994). Next, the researchers worked together to compare, discuss and finalize emergent themes into a consistent whole utilizing a back-and-forth, part-to-whole process of interpretation (Spiggle, 1994). The major themes formed three topical areas.

The first topical area, *Creativity is a Way of Thinking*, summarized participants' views of creativity as a different kind of thinking. The three themes within this topic described how the creative process occurred



through: viewing things from different perspectives, looking for multiple ideas or solutions, and recognizing untapped opportunities. The second topical area, *The Morphology of Creativity in the Apparel Industry*, presented participant perceptions of creativity as artistic creativity and/or creative problem solving. The third topical area, *Value Creation*, delineated the importance of creativity in bettering a business, a process, a product, a personal life, or a professional career. One of the major themes in this topical area emphasized the role of applied creativity, or the idea that for most creative decisions in apparel business must focus on the target consumer.

By offering rich accounts of twenty-nine industry professionals, this study presents an in-depth exploration of the role and meaning of creativity in the apparel profession. Such investigation significantly contributes to the body of literature that describes and defines the nature and manifestation of this complex phenomenon in everyday life. The research findings reveal the importance of creativity for all types of jobs within the apparel industry. Regardless of the primary focus of the job, from creative design to merchandising to sales, all participants emphasized the critical role of creative problem solving in effectively completing everyday responsibilities, their careers as a whole, and contributing to the success of their businesses. These results point to the need for developing and fostering creative problem solving skills in textiles and clothing students to better prepare them for careers within the apparel industry.

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